DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 315 258 RC 017 373

AUTHOR Garkovich, Lorraine
TITLE Our Changing Communities: What the Future Holds.
PUB DATE 26 Aug 89
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Community Development Society (Lexington, KY, August 26, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Change Strategies; Community Cooperation; *Community Development; Community Programs; *Cooperative Planning; *Decentralization; Economic Development; Organizational Change; *Public Policy; *Social Influences; Social Values

ABSTRACT

This speech examines how people perceive relationships among families, communities, and governments, and how these perceptions influence current family and community policies and programs. It also suggests new ways of understanding the nature of the social world and offers examples of policies and programs that stem from traditional beliefs and assumptions. Individualism, large-scale economic growth, and the primacy of local governments are profound influences on economic progress in communities. The emphasis on individualism, for example, has facilitated the privatization of American families. A belief in the value of large-scale industries in economic progress has the effect of limiting a community's economic development strategies. By extension, large-scale approaches tend to limit opportunities for families and communities. The primacy of local governments has led to inefficiencies, duplication, and destructive competition among communities. A growing number of local governments are fighting bankruptcy. By contrast, values that might form the basis of future communities include social justice, empowerment of people through networks, and the interdependence among individuals and communities. Emphasizing these views might lead to different approaches to community development and a new sense of national purpose. Family problems would become not just individual, but social problems. Innovative programs, not highly centralized agencies, would help individuals deal with family difficulties. Decentralization of community development strategy means emphasizing small businesses, producing more jobs, and reducing economic inequality. Development professionals, businesses, and government leaders are encouraged to work cooperatively toward improving their communities. (TES)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED315258

Our Changing Communities:

What the Future Holds

Lorraine Garkovich

S205 Agricultural Center North

University of Kentucky

Lexington KY 40506

August 26, 1989

Presented to the Annual Meeting of

the Community Development Society

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Lorraine Garkovich

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Introduction

Our society is like a quilt, our nation's families and communities its patches and our beliefs and values the threads binding us together. But today, the national quilt is a bit tattered, many of its pieces are threadbare, and in some places, the binding threads have worn. Our communities and families are in trouble and our traditional understandings of social life have not explained what has happened or guided us through these troubles.

Community development today is a difficult business. It is made difficult by the wide variety and pernicious nature of the individual, family and community problems which community development professionals confront in their daily work. It is made difficult by the lack of adequate resources to deal with these problems and the overlapping and often conflicting bureaucracies that have been established to deal with them. And finally, it is made difficult by the assumptions underlying how we understand the nature of these problems and therefore how we approach the business of community development. How we define the world around us influences what we see as problems and how we approach their solution. I believe that the future of America's communities depends upon whether we can develop a different understanding of how communities should function and the proper roles

RC 017373

of governments. Only by challenging our traditional notions can we begin to find other ways to build better communities..

My comments today are divided into three parts. First, I will examine how we think about the nature of and relationships among families, communities and governments; and how these views influence the nature of current policies and programs directed at families and communities. Next, I want to suggest some different ways of understanding the nature of the social world and finally, offer some examples of the policies and programs that would come from different beliefs and assumptions.

Traditional Views on the Family, Community and Government

The social fabric of every society is woven together with the threads of the beliefs which define the nature of the social world and give each society its characteristic hues and patterns. These beliefs explain and justify the structure and functioning of our institutions and tell us who we are, where we are going, and why. Our social policies are also defined by these beliefs. I want to highlight 3 sets of traditional beliefs that have shaped current social policies and programs and led to many of the problems we now confront.

The first set of beliefs that have shaped our definitions of community life and our social policies can be subsumed under the concept of individualism. As a society, we tend to focus almost exclusively on individual resources and choices. We believe that individuals and families act freely; that their choices are unlimited and; that only individual inadequacies account primarily for individual problems. Our cultural emphasis on individualism colors our understanding of the relationship between the individual, the family and society so that we often fail to recognize the many ways in which individual choices are shaped by their social situation.

This emphasis on individualism extends to our views on the family. In general, we have sanctified the family as a private institution. What occurs within the family is private and reflects how individual families act to shape their own destinies. In this context, as a society we do not acknowledge that there exists a vested public interest in

and responsibility for family welfare. The linkage between events in the family and conditions in the larger society is too often ignored. As a result, a long cultural tradition of privatizing family issues has led to the absence of social policies and programs to support the family and, we have virtually abandoned individual families to their own resources. This can be seen in several areas of family life.

Care of dependent family members is defined as a family not a social responsibility. We remain the only western industrialized nation without state-assisted child care even though a recent study by the Census Bureau indicates that one out of every three unemployed women cite lack of child care as the reason for not working. At the other end of the lifespan, many elderly Americans have to rely upon their children for care if they become infirm or, they must exhaust all their own financial resources in order to qualify for a limited amount of state-supported care. For the urban elderly, there are private care facilities and services available but at a cost that many cannot afford. But for the elderly who reside in rural areas, the home for one third of all older Americans, private care facilities and services are geographically distant if available at all. This situation persists despite the fact that by the year 2020 nearly one of every 5 Americans will be over the age of 65. Our commitment to individualism and its extension, the privatization of the family, has kept our society from accepting the most basic responsibility for the care of those among us least able to provide for themselves.

Similarly, families experiencing financial instability are assumed to be responsible for their situation and therefore, responsible for finding their own paths to economic security. A bewildering array of "safety net" programs offer some assistance to struggling families, yet few bring families out of poverty and eligibility requirements often penalize families struggling to remain together. For example, intact married couple families are not eligible for Aid to Families with Dependent Children in most states and there are few shelters for the homeless that admit married couple families. For rural families facing financial problems, kin and friends are the only sources of assistance since small communities cannot afford to offer services. The only homeless shelter in a

30 county area of eastern Kentucky will be closing this fall due to lack of funds. What will the families and individuals who have used this shelter do? They will move to larger communities in search of help or move in with relatives as the majority of rural homeless persons currently do. A recent report on poverty in America's suburbs indicates that nearly 500 suburbs face a 12 to 1 income disparity with their richer neighbors. The suburban poor face both few services and the power of the myth of suburban affluence which masks the financial instability of more than 9.5 million suburban Americans. Despite the growing number of poor persons and families and the persistence of hundreds of pockets of poverty, as a nation we have yet to develop a coherent set of policies and programs to assist financially unstable families. Our belief that poverty exists due to the choices that individuals and families make undermines public responses to this problem.

Our emphasis on individualism and the privatization of the family has consequences for communities and the practice of community development. The extent to which family social services are available in a community and the types of services offered depends upon whether communities are willing to commit resources to this purpose and the amount of resources that communities have available. Hence, a family's access to supportive services is as much a function of location as it is of need. Furthermore, services tend to focus on helping individuals or families work out their individual problems as when financial instability is "solved" through debt counseling. Rarely do we address the underlying structural conditions that lead to financial instability, such as job growth only in low paying service firms. Efforts at economic development are justified in general terms, such as improving the quality of family economic life, yet in practice there is little attention to insuring that the benefits of economic development flow to those most in need. This brings us to a second set of traditional beliefs shaping our communities.

For decades, national opinion polls have clearly demonstrated that Americans believe in economic growth and progress; we tend to see our economic future as being brighter than our present. Associated with this is the belief that economic growth eventually benefits

all Americans; that is; as the economic pie gets bigger, the benefits "trickle down" through all classes. Finally, as a society we value "bigness," we believe that bigger is better. We are attracted and fascinated by the tallest building, the biggest stadium, the largest manufacturing plant. This set of beliefs has profoundly influenced our approaches to economic development. While in theory, we emphasize diverse strategies to economic development as well as a concern for who benefits, our practice has often been different.

Much economic development has been "smokestack chasing," that is, trying to attract a new major employer for the community. National and state programs in support of economic development tend to encourage this strategy by providing incentive packages (e.g., low interest loans, capital improvements; tax credits), and community leaders are attracted to this approach since it produces a visible and dramatic change in the local economic landscape. In a sense, this approach to economic development reflects our fondness for bigness -- big development projects are attractive to local leaders and governments. Simply consider the frenetic bidding among states for automobile plants (e.g., the Saturn plant in Tennessee and the Toyota plant in Kentucky) or the super collider. While there are other types of economic development programs many have problems ranging from limited funding (e.g., small business loans) to eligibility requirments that exclude certain types of communities (e.g., enterprise zones).

Underlying this "big bang for the buck" approach to economic development is the belief that a major new employer will automatically produce community-wide economic benefits. In other words, there is a belief that adding new jobs to a community will reduce unemployment, and circulate new dollars through the community multiplying the positive effects of the new firm. Rarely are actions taken to insure that these assumptions become reality. Furthermore, rarely are actions taken to ameliorate potential negative consequences of the new development. For example, the new Toyota plant in Georgetown, Kentucky, has seriously strained the ability of the local community to provide services. Local roads are overburdened by traffic to and from the plant, yet the local government cannot afford the cost of constructing a by-pass and the state government claims it is the

local community's responsibility to "solve" its own problems. Yet, the state managed to a offer a $200 million incentive program to Toyota to locate in Kentucky.

Our belief in economic progress and the spillover benefits of growth has limited our economic development strategies and this has had consequences for families and communities. For many financially unstable families, a job or a better paying job remains a promise unfulfilled by new employers because they lack the education or the skills to compete for these new jobs. Research in communities that have attracted a new manufacturing plant confirms that a significant proportion of jobs go to migrants, thus leading to limited reductions in local unemployment rates. Or, when local people do take jobs they often are those at the lowest end of the pay scale. Furthermore, local communities often find themselves facing unexpected costs with the arrival of a new employer, such as the need to expand or improve sewage treatment or to build a new access road. Finally, some types of economic growth, such as the arrival of a discount retailer, may produce economic losses in neighboring communities. For example, a recent study of the effects of the opening of a Wal-Mart in Iowa communities suggests that while employment and retail sales increase in the host community, they decline in nearby ones as residents seek the lower prices and wider variety of products at the new chain store. In this sense, our traditional approaches to economic development may produce negative effects for the region as a whole.

This suggests a final set of traditional beliefs affecting contemporary American society. We believe in the primacy of local and state governments, and indeed political events of the last decade have been marked by the diminution of the federal influence over many aspects of national life. Our history is one of "local boosterism," with communities vying with each other for economic growth. In the 1820s, Baltimore funded the construction of a turnpike to the eastern edge of the Cumberland Road, New York city business and political leaders then secured funding for constructing the Erie Canal. Faced with a diversion of a significant amount of commercial traffic to New York markets, Baltimore responded in 1828 by beginning construction of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad.

This type of inter-community competition for growth is a hallmark of national life. We have somehow deluded ourselves ourselves into believing that the economic health of our neighbors has nothing to do with our own. As if some communities can become islands of wealth and prosperity in a sea of poverty. Yet studies show that trade centers rise and fall with the fortunes of their hinterlands. Finally, every settlement formed its own government and the history of our cities is marked by battles over annexation, as each local unit of government jealously guards its independence.

This commitment to local independence has led to inefficiencies, duplication and sometimes deadly competition. With the devolution or delegation of fiscal and functional responsibilities to local governments, communities of all sizes and economic conditions have to generate the financial and human resources to support services and capital improvements. Yet not all communities are capable of meeting these demands. For example, a growing number of counties and municipalities are on the brink of bankruptcy, forced to reduce or curtail services and forego capital improvements. Moreover, even when sufficient financial resources are available, many local governments have been unable to efficiently perform their governmental responsibilities. In one sense, the enormous number of local governmental units (e.g., over 1000 in the metropolitan St. Louis area) has meant that limited resources must be spread among too many users. Ironically, although we acknowledge economies of scale in business enterprises, we have failed to apply this concept to the business of government.

Although we recognize the inefficiencies inherent in too many governmental units and the problems inherent in intergovernmental competition, as professionals we have typically avoided directly addressing the issue. There are sound reasons for this, such as, the fact that some of us are employed by these governments or we practice our business with their cooperation. Yet in doing so, the way we practice our profession adds to the problems. For example, when we work with community A to attract a new manufacturing plant that will be discharging large quantities of sewage into a nearby river, we are affecting the cost of providing water services in the communities downstream. Communities that we

may also be assisting to improve the quality of local services. Or, after years of being the recipients of centrally organized and delivered programs, communities may discover that they no longer have the talents or the will to do for themselves. Finally, many problems simply cannot be effectively accomplished by a single governmental unit, yet regional cooperation is rarely discussed since it challenges our traditional commitment to the primacy of local government.

Thus, traditional beliefs in individualism, the sanctity of the family, economic progress and economic opportunities, and the primacy of local government have colored our understanding of the nature of the world as well as the kinds of policies and programs we develop to deal with this world. To a certain extent, the social problems we bemoan every day -- family instability, poverty, unemployment, a growing income gap between the rich and the poor, bankrupt and heavily indebted governments and, the inability of local governments to deal with a growing list of community ills -- have their roots in how these beliefs shape our social actions. Given this assumption, what different ways of understanding the world would be the basis for building better communities in the future?

Beliefs Underlying the Communities of Tomorrow

Three beliefs could be the basis of future communities -- social justice, empowerment and interdependence. These are not unfamiliar, we have heard these words before. But, what I am suggesting is that to build the communities of tomorrow, we must give more than lip service to these beliefs. I want to briefly describe what I believe to be the kinds of communities we should try to nurture and how these ideas can help us achieve this goal.

Let us imagine the community where we would all want to live. It is a community where families, regardless of income or structure, have access to a wide variety of services and programs designed to nurture and strengthen them. It is a community where residents have opportunities to find jobs that match their skills and, provide a living wage. It is a community with different economic classes, but where a person begins life is not the primary determinant of what they can achieve. It is a community that encourages its members to be active participants in all phases of life by acknowledging that everyone has

skills or ideas that can contribute to bettering their world. It is a community that recognizes that some tasks cannot be completed and some goals cannot be achieved alone. Indeed, cooperation and interdependence, not competition, would be the key characteristics of successful communities and a successful society.

Social justice is one part of the foundation of better communities. Social justice involves fairness and equity in the functioning of social institutions. It is the reduction of the social risks people experience due to their involuntary exposure to the different conditions that affect their life chances. In other words, all Americans, regardless of where they live should confront the same life opportunities and risks. Rural residence should not translate into higher risks because your community is the site of hazardous waste landfills or manufacturing plants with toxic emissions. Suburban residence should not translate into higher risks due to the lack of supporting social services or isolation from job opportunities. One goal of community development should be to insure that proposed projects or activities do not benefit some by placing others at greater social risk. In this way, community development would contribute to the achievement of social justice.

Empowerment is another concept often discussed but not always practiced. In broad terms, empowerment is enhancing the possibilities for people to influence those persons and organizations that affect their lives. Empowerment involves recognizing and nurturing the unique strengths and competencies of people that derive from the wisdom of their everday experiences. Empowerment also entails strengthening social networks and community institutions by promoting a diversity for approaches to dealing with social life. An important route to empowerment is building local capacity. When a community and its people are empowered, they have the capacity to articulate their needs; to identify actions to solve these needs; and, to mobilize and organize resources in pursuit of communally-defined goals. When the people of a community come together to visualize a common future and then work together to achieve it, there develops a recognition that everyone -- regardless of education, job, race, background or whatever -- has something

important to contribute to that process. Indeed, the greater the diversity the participants, the richer the vision and the more effective its accomplishment. Furthermore, people and communities come to realize that together they can accomplish more than if single groups tried to work on their own. In a real sense, empowerment is what the American experience is all about. Millions of people came together, bringing their diverse cultural heritage to the building of a nation. We should have this same commitment to building on our strengths and our diversity to the process of community development.

Interdependence is a property of systems and refers to the fact that while components of a system may be more or less complete in themselves, each is also necessary to the functioning or operation of other components. While I am not stating unequivocally that communities are systems, I think the concept is a useful one. Interdependence reminds us that individuals, families and communities do not function in a social vacuum. Every day, the choices confronting families and communities are as much a reflection of their position in the larger society as they are the outcome of their own actions. When a new Toyota plant located in Georgetown, KY, the neighboring communities were not asked if they were ready for spillover industrial and residential growth or for increased traffic on their rural two lane roads. This illustrates an important aspect of interdependence --feedback -- or the fact that changes in one family or community can lead to changes in others. If we accept this, there are two logical outcomes. First, community economic development is more appropriately regional or national economic development, for what happens in community A will have ripple effects throughout the economic system. Second, economic development efforts may become synergistic when communities cooperate and pool their unique resources and talents to produce an economic effect greater than those that could be achieved by one. For our purposes, then, acknowledging interdependence means working to build networks both within and among communities.

There is another kind of interdependence that needs to be recognized if we are to build the communities of tomorrow -- the interdependence of the research and applied

aspects of our profession. Often we hear comments about the supposed differences in purposes and methods between academics and practitioners. Yes, this is like focusing upon the differences in form and function of the liver and kidneys without recognizing that both are essential to the ultimate goal of the total organism, survival. Whether as researchers or practitioners, we all share the same goal, enhancing the quality of community life. This goal can only be accomplished by effectively applying in innovative ways the conclusions of research finding, tempered by the insights of practitioners. Good research can help us to understand what works in which situations for what reasons and with what consequences. This knowledge can and should be the basis for developing action recommendations or programs for specific communities. We empower communities when we inform citizens of action alternatives and describe the consequences of their various choices so that residents can make informed decisions. But good research is based on reality. Researchers must recognize that practitioners have much to tell them about how communities and organizations really work and why.

We need each other to succeed. Good research and good practice depend on each other and support each other. The interdependence of the research and applied aspects of our profession should mirror the interdependence of community systems.

Strategies for Building the Communities of Tomorrow

Employing these views of the nature of social life would lead to different approaches to community development as well as a different sense of national purpose.

We would begin by acknowledging that society has a vested interest in assuring socioeconomic equity among families, regardless of residence or demographic characteristics. When families cannot provide for their children, or families experience other problems, the consequences are felt outside the family. Family problems become social problems because they effect all the institutions in our communities. We need a commitment to a national policy of providing financial and technical assistance to communities for the development of community-based programs that address the service and economic needs of families. What we do today is establish centralized bureaucracies to

administer rigidly defined programs which essentially treat all families as if they were alike and fit our preference for the nuclear family. Yet, families vary tremendously in their structure and functioning. What is needed are innovative programs to assist individuals in various family situations to deal with their situations as effectively as possible. But these should not be centralized. For, it is at the local level that people best understand their needs. And, by encouraging local initiatives, residents would come to recognize their strengths and their dependence upon each other to sustain their community.

There is a need to acknowledge that society has a vested interest in reducing the economic inequalities among people and communities. Both family and community financial stability would be the first step toward this goal and could be accomplished by reducing both unemployment and underemployment. More jobs and a better match between job requirements and workers' skills are necessary preconditions for financial stability. Once again, this can be most effectively accomplished not through centralized programs but by encouraging local initiatives through federal funding. We need to provide the means for communities to use their strengths, their knowledge of local conditions and their particular competencies to develop their own approaches to strengthening and diversifying the local economy. Community reinvestment corporations are the first step towards this strategy for empowering communities, yet even these establish rather narrow guidelines for acceptable projects. More appropriate would be a national commitment to providing financial and technical assistance to entrepreneurs. During the 1980s, a substantial proportion of new jobs came from small businesses. These firms were more likely to hire the formerly unemployed and to provide jobs to new workers than expansions by existing firms. Entrepreneurial excavating diversifies the economic base, enables new actors to enter the economy and encourages local residents to exploit their local resources, skills and talents. This process would not only expand economic opportunities but also empower community residents.

There is a need to acknowledge that intergovernmental cooperation will not occur on

its own, it must be encouraged. Programs that increase the interdependence within and among communities must be nurtured. There are many small-scale, public-private partnerships that serve as examples, and illustrate potential benefits. For example, increasingly, businesses have recognized that their own future health is tied to the health of our schools, and this is producing some innovative rearrangements in the traditional relationships between work, school and home. In some communities, businesses "adopt" a local school and employees donate time as tutors and the company donates funds for special school projects or the purchase of new equipment. In Versailles, KY, Texas Instruments has initiated a program offering basic literacy, high school equivalency and other classes for its employees in the plant and on company time. Plans are underway to have local teachers "shadow" workers in various industries to develop a better understanding of the skills and knowledge required in modern manufacturing plants. Perhaps the most ambitious program is "Forward in the Fifth." The fifth congressional district of Kentucky has had the lowest rate of high school graduation and the highest rate of adult illiteracy in the nation and also contains some of the poorest school districts in the nation. Forward in the Fifth forges partnerships among families, schools, businesses and nonprofit agencies in a coordinated effort to encourage students to remain in school and adults to complete their GEDs. While the base of the program is the county-based local affiliates, local affiliates do provide funds to the regional coordinating office for programatic efforts that encompass the entire congressional district. In less than five years, the program has made considerable inroads on the level of student dropouts and the proportion of adults achieving their GED.

These types of cooperative efforts must be extended to governmental units. Many localities can no longer afford to provide the minimal services their citizens expect, and it is unlikely that the federal government will provide the funds for infrastructure improvements as it has in the past. During the 1960s, a number of regional authorities to deal with water and sewerage were established, primarily in large metropolitan areas. There is a need to extend this concept to communities of all sizes, and to expand the

range of services encompassed by these authorities. For example, solid waste is a growing problem, communities today may ship their solid waste across state lines in search of landfills. The technology to separate solid waste into its component parts and to transform these types of waste into economically profitable products is available. Yet it is beyond the financial resources of most small communities, but not beyond the reach of several communities cooperating in the costs of a regional solid waste treatment plant. Similarly, ambulance services, shelters for the homeless, day care centers and a host of other services can all be more efficiently organized and financed by several cooperating communities, if they can get past the issues of siting and administration. Cooperation, however, will occur only if the funds available for such projects are for those involving joint ventures among several communities. If joint ventures have been so successful in strengthening businesses, why shouldn't we apply this idea to strengthening our communities?

Finally, there is a need to acknowledge that as community development professionals we must begin to take a more active role in the policy-making process. We have a professional responsibility to convey to policy makers, at all levels of government, the need to re-examine our traditional views of family and community processes. We cannot simply be enactors of programs and policies that have inherent flaws, for then, we simply continue to contribute to the deterioration of America's communities. Rather, we must work with decision-makers, providing them with information on what works and why. And, the information we provide must be in the context of viable political options that also explains possible consequences flowing from each policy option. In effect, this means that we must become advocates for empowering citizens so that they can build communities of social justice.

Conclusions

America's communities are in trouble. Infrastructures are deteriorating, services are declining in quality and availability, income disparities within and among communities widen as a growing number of citizens find themselves unable to provide even shelter for

their families. The federal government, burdened with its own financial problems, has been shifting an ever greater responsibility for making communities work to local officials. Yet many citizens and community leaders feel powerless, alienated by decades of programs that denied them the opportunity to share in the decisions that affected their lives. And decades of endless competition among communities has led to a sense that in the struggle for economic growth, there can only be one winner.

Whether our communities continue along this path depends, in part, on whether we are willing to offer a new vision of a better community. To do so will require us to shed some old beliefs and to embrace others that we have often talked about but less often acted upon. We must be willing to become the designers of a new quilt of American communities. We cannot simply talk to each other about the kinds of cloth and tools we need to do our weaving, we must go to the political market and make our concerns and our ideas heard. This is how we will be part of building better communities for tomorrow. And this is our challenge for the future.